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Battle for Iwo Jima, 1945

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Amphibious tractors approaching Iwo Jima, February 1945.

Battle for Iwo Jima

"The battle of Iwo Island has been won. The United States Marines by their individual and collective courage have conquered a base which is as necessary to us in our continuing forward movement toward final victory as it was vital to the enemy in staving off ultimate defeat.

By their victory, the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine Divisions and other units of the Fifth Amphibious Corps have made an accounting to their country which only history will be able to value fully. Among the Americans who served on Iwo Island, uncommon valor was a common virtue."

--Admiral Chester W. Nimitz



Iwo Jima, which means Sulfur Island, was strategically important as an air base for fighter escorts supporting long-range bombing missions against mainland Japan. Because of the distance between mainland Japan and U.S. bases in the Mariana Islands, the capture of Iwo Jima would provide an emergency landing strip for crippled B-29s returning from bombing runs. The seizure of Iwo would allow for sea and air blockades, the ability to conduct intensive air bombardment and to destroy the enemy's air and naval capabilities.

The seizure of Iwo Jima was deemed necessary, but the prize would not come easy. The fighting that took place during the 36-day assault would be immortalized in the words of Commander, Pacific Fleet/Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, who said, "Among the Americans who served on Iwo Island, uncommon valor was a common virtue."

To the Japanese leadership, the capture of Iwo Jima meant the battle for Okinawa, and the invasion of Japan itself, was not far off.

Commanders

Commanders for the operation, code named Detachment, were assigned

as follows:

--Admiral Raymond A. Spruance was the operation's overall commander.

--Joint Expeditionary Force commander was Vice Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner. Second in command of the Joint Expeditionary Force was Rear Admiral Harry W. Hill.

--Lieutenant General Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith was assigned as the commanding general of the expeditionary troops.

--The 5th Amphibious Corps was commanded by Major General Harry Schmidt. Under his command fell the 3rd Marine Division commander, Major General Graves B. Erskine; the 4th Marine Division commander, Major General Clifton B. Cates; and the 5th Marine Division commander, Major General Keller E. Rockey.

Bombardment

Initial carrier raids against Iwo Jima began in June 1944. Prior to the invasion, the 8-square-mile island would suffer the longest, most intensive shelling of any Pacific island during the war. The 7th Air Force, working out of the Marianas, supplied the B-24 heavy bombers for the campaign.

In addition to the air assaults on Iwo, the Marines requested 10 days of pre-invasion naval bombardment. Due to other operational commitments and the fact that a prolonged air assault had been waged on Iwo Jima, Navy planners authorized only three days of naval bombardment. Unfavorable weather conditions would further hamper the effects of naval bombardment. Despite this, Turner decided to keep the invasion date as planned, and the Marines prepared for the Feb. 19 D-day.

D-day

More than 450 ships massed off Iwo as the H-hour bombardment pounded the island. Shortly after 9 a.m., Marines of the 4th and 5th divisions hit beaches Green, Red, Yellow and Blue abreast, initially finding little enemy resistance. Coarse volcanic sand hampered the movement of men and machines as they struggled to move up the beach. As the protective naval gunfire subsided to allow for the Marine advance, the Japanese emerged from their fortified underground positions to begin a heavy barrage of fire against the invading force.

The 4th Marine Division pushed forward against heavy opposition to take the Quarry, a Japanese strong point. The 5th Marine Division's 28th Marines had the mission of isolating Mount Suribachi. Both tasks were accomplished that day.

The Battle Continues

Feb. 20, one day after the landing, the 28th Marines secured the southern end of Iwo and moved to take the summit of Suribachi. By day's end, one third of the island and Motoyama Airfield No. 1 was controlled by the Marines. By Feb. 23, the 28th Marines would reach the top of Mount Suribachi and raise the U.S. flag.

The 3rd Marine Division joined the fighting on the fifth day of the battle. These Marines immediately began the mission of securing the center sector of the island. Each division fought hard to gain ground against a determined Japanese defender. The Japanese leaders knew with the fall of Suribachi and the capture of the airfields that the Marine advance on the island could not be stopped; however, they would make the Marines fight for every inch of land they won.

Lieutenant General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, commander of the ground forces on Iwo Jima, concentrated his energies and his forces in the central and northern sections of the island. Miles of interlocking caves, concrete blockhouses and pillboxes proved to be one of the most impenetrable defenses encountered by the Marines in the Pacific.

The Marines worked together to drive the enemy from the high ground. Their goal was to capture the area that appropriately became known as the "Meat Grinder." This section of the island included three distinct terrain features, which were the highest point on the northern portion of the island, Hill 382; an elevation known as "Turkey Knob," which had been reinforced with concrete and was home to a large enemy communications center, and the "Amphitheater," a southeastern extension of Hill 382.

The 3rd Marine Division encountered the most heavily fortified portion of the island in their move to take Airfield No. 2. As with most of the fighting on Iwo Jima, frontal assault was the method used to gain each inch of ground. By nightfall on March 9, the 3rd division reached the island's northeastern beach, cutting the enemy defenses in two.



On the left of the 3rd Marine Division, the 5th Marine Division pushed up the western coast of Iwo Jima from the central airfield to the island's northern tip. Moving to seize and hold the eastern portion of the island, the 4th Marine Division encountered a "mini banzai" attack from the final members of the Japanese Navy serving on Iwo. This attack resulted in the death of nearly 700 enemy and ended the centralized resistance of enemy forces in the 4th division's sector. The 4th division would join forces with the 3rd and 5th on the coast on March 10.

A proud moment for those who worked so hard to gain control of the island was when the first emergency landing was made by a B-29 bomber on March 4. Repairs were made, refueling was completed and the aircraft was off to complete its mission.

Operations entered the final phases March 11; enemy resistance was no longer centralized. Individual pockets of resistance were taken one by one.



Finally on March 26, following a banzai attack against troops and air corps personnel near the beaches, the island was declared secure. The U.S. Army's 147th Infantry regiment assumed ground control of the island on April 4, relieving the largest body of Marines committed in combat in one operation during World War II.

Campaign results

The 36-day assault resulted in more than 26,000 American casualties, including 6,800 dead. Of the 20,000 Japanese defenders, only 1,083 survived. The Marines' efforts, however, provided a vital link in the U.S. chain of bomber bases. By war's end, 2,400 B-29 bombers carrying 27,000 crewmen made unscheduled landings on the island.

Historians described U.S. forces' attack against the Japanese defense as "throwing human flesh against reinforced concrete." In the end, Iwo Jima was won not only by the fighting spirit of the Marines, but by the meticulous planning and support provided by the Navy and Army through supply efforts, medical care, and air and naval gunfire.

Twenty-seven Medals of Honor were awarded to Marines and sailors, many posthumously, more than were awarded for any other single operation during the war.



Two flag raisings

At 8 a.m., on Feb. 23, a patrol of 40 men from 3rd Platoon, E Company, 2nd Battalion, 28th Marines, led by 1st Lieutenant Harold G. Schrier, assembled at the base of Mount Suribachi. The platoon's mission was to take the crater at Suribachi's peak and raise the U.S. flag.

The platoon slowly climbed the steep trails to the summit, but encountered no enemy fire. As they reached the top, the patrol members took positions around the crater watching for pockets of enemy resistance as other members of the patrol looked for something on which to raise the flag.

At 10:20 a.m., the flag was hoisted on a steel pipe above the island. This symbol of victory sent a wave of strength to the battle-weary fighting men below, and struck a further mental blow against the island's defenders.

Marine Corps photographer Sergeant Lou Lowery captured this first flag raising on film just as the enemy hurled a grenade in his direction. Dodging the grenade, Lowery hurled his body over the edge of the crater and tumbled 50 feet. His camera lens was shattered, but he and his film were safe.

Three hours later another patrol was dispatched to raise another, larger flag. The battle for Iwo Jima is encapsulated by this historic flag raising atop Suribachi, which was captured on film by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal. His photo, seen around the world as a symbol of American values, would earn him many awards including the 1945 Pulitzer Prize.

Over the years, the flag raising has come to symbolize the spirit of the Corps to all Marines. On Nov. 19, 1954, a bronze monument of the flag raising, sculpted by Felix de Weldon and located near Arlington National Cemetery, was dedicated to all Marines who have given their lives in defense of their country.

Then Vice President Richard M. Nixon said, "This statue symbolizes the hopes and dreams of America, and the real purpose of our foreign policy. We realize that to retain freedom for ourselves, we must be concerned when people in other parts of the world may lose theirs. There is no greater challenge to statesmanship than to find a way that such sacrifices as this statue represents are not necessary in the future, and to build the kind of world in which people can be free, in which nations can be independent, and in which people can live together in peace and friendship."

US Navy Ships Sunk or Badly Damaged By Enemy Action at Iwo Jima

Date	Name	Cause	Killed	Wounded
17 Feb	LCI(G)-438	Coastal battery	0	4
	LCI(G)-441	Coastal battery	7	21
	LCI(G)-449	Coastal battery	21	18
	LCI(G)-450	Coastal battery	0	6
	LCI(G)-457	Coastal battery	1	20
	LCI(G)-466	Coastal battery	5	19
	LCI(G)-469	Coastal battery	0	7
	LCI(G)-473	Coastal battery	0	31
18 Feb	LCI(G)-474	Coastal battery	3	18
	Blessman (DE-69)	Air attack	42	29
	Gamble (DD-123)	Air attack	5	9
20 Feb	LSM-216	Air attack	0	0
21 Feb	Bismarck Sea (CVE-95)	Air attack	119	99
	Saratoga (CV-3)	Air attack	123	192

	<i>Napa</i> (APA-157)	Air attack	0	0
25 Feb	<i>LCI(M)-760</i>	Coastal battery	0	2
28 Feb	<i>Terry</i> (DD-513)	Coastal battery	11	19
	<i>Whitley</i> (AKA-91)	Air attack	0	5

Source: Adapted from Miller, Kimberly J. "Battle for Iwo Jima: WWII Fact Sheet" Washington, D.C.: Navy & Marine Corps WWII Commemorative Committee [subsequently disestablished], Navy Office of Information, n.d.; and Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Victory in the Pacific, 1945 – History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol 14. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960): 389.



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